

Textbooks widen Indo-Pak gulf

Washington, Oct 5 (UNI): A new Washington-based study, "Confidence-building in South Asia", has said school textbooks and media coverage in India and Pakistan perpetuate and sustain a negative image of relations between the two countries.

Sponsored by the Henry L. Timson Centre, the study says Indian and Pakistani media do not always present an adverse picture on their own initiative. Occasionally, the two governments egg them on to undermine the credibility of the other side.

Written and electronic media and national educational systems create "the myth of an enemy whose hostility is unconditional" among Indian and Pakistani people.

Co-authored by Professor Samina Yasmeen of the University of Western Australia and Aabha Dixit of the Delhi-based Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis, the study says dissenting voices can be heard in both countries about the "persona" of its neighbour.

The Urdu works of the Pakistani poet, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, and the Indian writer, Krishan Chander, oppose the usual trend, the study says. But such works are hushed up by the

respective governments and consciously or unconsciously marginalised by the media. If they are too popular to be marginalised, as was the case with Faiz, the works are given a de-politicised and romantic flavour.

Trained to look at its neighbour negatively, people use unusual viewpoints to reinforce their belief in the dominant view. The "myth of the enemy" therefore, continues to prevail. As this myth is largely fed by ignorance, the study calls for combatting it through increased travel and contact between the countries.

It also suggests simplification of travel facilities, introduction of student exchange programmes at school and university level, cooperative ventures between women's organisations, joint programmes for rural development in select villages and prevention of pollution control.

The study says the emphasis on the military dimension of confidence building measures is "far too narrow." It ignores core issues and devises solutions acceptable to one side only. India and Pakistan need to move towards non-military confidence building measures.

The study adds that textbooks used in India and Pakistan provide selective information about the identity of the country.

In Pakistan, students are taught to look at their country as an Islamic state having close relations with other Muslim states. India is portrayed as having "nefarious designs to damage Pakistan." Not only did India try to deny Pakistan its legal share of assets after partition, it also dismembered Pakistan in 1971.

Pakistani textbooks also ignore the "non-Islamic" history of the subcontinent, omitting mention of the Ashoka Empire. For them, history starts with Mohammad bin Qasim's arrival. Discussions on the Mughal Empire favours the "good and pious emperor Aurangzeb over emperor Akbar who married Hindu women and introduced Din-e-Akbari."

Though Indian textbooks do not ignore the Islamic tradition, the presentation of information is biased.

While Akbar is eulogised for his enlightened policies, Aurangzeb is indirectly criticised for religious fanaticism. Negative portrayal of Aurangzeb ignores that Hindu culture flourished during his reign.